

Women, children and homelessness

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COMPILER'S COMMENTS

Every week, as part of my job, I get to sit in a room and look into the eyes of homeless women who are on the growing edge. I hear of their pain and struggles, but also I see their successes and their faith. I am always impressed and inspired. What a privilege it is, and how different from the general view people may have of homelessness and how it occurs. Although each woman's story is unique, some basic themes emerge on how she has come to be in this predicament.

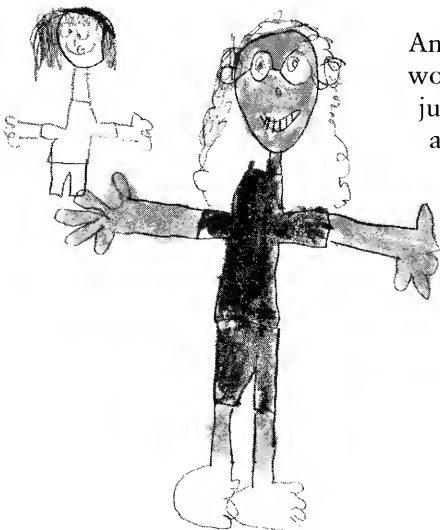
Homelessness for women occurs in our society for a variety of reasons. A woman who is mentally ill will often find herself in this predicament. It is difficult for mentally ill people to consistently take medication, so they may find their lives out of control. Because of their chaotic lifestyles, their possible support people become burned out and are either unable or unwilling to provide shelter.

Another reason is domestic abuse. A woman may have to take her children and just the clothes on their backs to get out and find a place of safety. An extreme example of this would be one woman, who fled her home, her state, and chose to be placed in a witness protection program, which included a total change of name and identification. But not all become homeless because of abuse.

Sometimes women make bad choices of friends in their lives. If you grow up in a family where abuse or neglect has been your lot, you may not have the tools to recognize bad choices, or if you do recognize the choice as bad, the emotional needs outweigh the warnings in your mind. If you have cast your lot with an unreliable person, it may not be surprising that you find yourself out on the street. And a hard lesson to be learned is that babies do not solve problems. They only create greater ones.

Sometimes, women just experience a series of catastrophes which ends in homelessness. It could be divorce, deaths, loss of friends, disease, loss of a job or jobs, loss of housing. Almost always, the woman's birth family is too depleted itself to help, or they are unwilling. Sometimes it is dangerous to her and her children's health to be close to family. So a woman can be without resources, family or friends to support her as she works to get on her feet.

The major hurdles a woman has to confront to be self-supporting are: a good job and consistent child care; a good place to live, which means being able to save first and last month's rent and a financial cushion for emergencies; and reliable transportation. There are also credit problems, court problems with custody or child support, and sometimes outstanding traffic fines, which need to be resolved. These may have resulted from inattention but



Noreen Trautwein is a licensed Marriage Family Therapist, who has been in private practice for over 20 years in Claremont, California. She also runs the women's support group at Pacific Lifeline, a shelter for homeless women and children in Upland, California. She is married, with 3 married sons and 8 grandchildren. She attends Alta Loma Brethren in Christ Church.

also because she lacks resources. These are subsistence needs and the need for social activities and fun are not even a part of the desperate struggle to survive.

It is no wonder that even highly motivated women can be overwhelmed and depressed when they see this kind of mountain in front of them. There are many community resources that can help,

and part of a shelter's job is to help each woman access and use these resources as a bridge to independence.

It has been my pleasure to work with these women, women to admire, who work hard to become self-supporting and succeed. And I am pleased to present some of their stories.

—compiled by Noreen Trautwein

FROM THE

It seems fitting that we have published issues on domestic violence and homelessness back to back.

This issue was originally titled "Women and homelessness." After reading the articles and U.S. statistics (I was unable to find Canadian statistics), it became clear that the title needed to be changed to include children. We also featured children in this issue by printing the artwork that they have drawn during counseling sessions as reported in the article by Betty Stevens. In 1998, the U.S. Conference of Mayors' survey found that single men comprised 45 percent of the urban homeless population and single women 14 percent. Families with children constituted approximately 40 percent of people who became homeless. For the most part, when women become homeless, they will have children with them. And probably many of these women and children will have experienced domestic violence. According to the U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless, battered women who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and home-

lessness. 46 percent of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness. Unfortunately, it seems fitting that we have published issues on domestic violence and homelessness back to back. Dr. Elliot Liebow, former chief of the Center for the Study of Work and Mental Health of the National Institute of Mental Health, wrote the book *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women* after doing a study of single, homeless women in a small city outside of Washington, D.C. He wrote that the "crazy-making and destructive world of homelessness" was responsible, many times, for the alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illnesses of homeless women. Specifically, "homelessness was seen as a cause of mental illness as often as mental health problems were seen as a cause of homelessness" (Liebow, page 208). Homelessness destroys people. For this reason, I am amazed by the success stories that we read about in these articles. They gave me renewed hope that individuals, when organized, can make a difference towards alleviating the suffering of women and children in need. In this issue, we have featured two programs that are doing this work. Pacific Lifeline is a program located in Upland, California that is sponsored by the Brethren in Christ Church. Bridge of Hope, located in south-central Pennsylvania, is supported by a variety of churches. These programs are different in their structure but are the same in their mission of assisting women and children in escaping the destructive world of homelessness. I thank them both for their participation in this issue.

—edited by Debra Gingerich

The MCC Committees on Women's Concerns believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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Beating the odds

A very good friend of mine gave me a very simple gift to treasure just days before I moved from southern California to begin a new life near family in Oklahoma. I can hold onto it when I drive down the road, look at it as I gain my thoughts, and carry it in my pocket as a reminder of where I have been. With tears of joy, she gave it to me and told me that it reminds her of me. It is ordinary in appearance on the outside, and surprisingly beautiful and unique from all others on the inside. Like me, its tough exterior protects its fragile crystalline interior. This gift is a palm-sized geode. I met this friend while I was a resident of Pacific Lifeline located in Upland, California, where my four children and I lived for eighteen months.

I will always remember the day that God brought me to Pacific Lifeline. I was in my twenties, and lived in a one bedroom house with my 18-month-old twins and older two sons from my first marriage. I had recently been promoted to Finance Manager at a car dealership and kept a very fast pace. In the six short months in which I had been on my own, I managed to mismanage my new independence to the point where I was behind on my rent and forced to look for another place to live.

The things that led up to this were many. As a young child, I was extremely bright and did well socially and academically. My mother says that I was a particularly introspective child. She called me her little angel and encouraged my independence. She was always positive with me, which makes what was to come in the short years ahead seem unlikely in retrospect. I remember writing poems for her about roses and their thorns and how they were similar to life. These early writings were an attempt to cope with an alcoholic father who was often abusive. Not many people realized the reasons for my growing rebellion, and as the years passed, the look of optimism once seen in my eyes became cold and distant as I became a stranger even to myself.

I gave my life to the Lord at a young age, but in the years of my adolescence, I became very rebellious. By the time I was sixteen, I was involved in what would prove to be a very destructive and life altering relationship with a man eight years my elder. I turned my face from God and filled my body with drugs, letting go of all my lifelong ambitions.

I became an angry teenager who did not care about surviving to adulthood. I internalized all of my anger and took satisfaction in taking dangerous risks. I was very persuasive and often the life of the party. Some people did not know whether to laugh or run when I got on a roll. This self-destructive attitude led me to the unbelievable turning down of a scholarship to the University of California in Santa Barbara and into a relationship which lasted eight years.

At the age of 16, while working in a concession stand at the fair, I met the man I would marry. He was 24 years old. I focused all of my energy on this man. The years to come would prove to be the most painful years of my life, worse than watching my father play Russian roulette in front of me, or any tyrant my father ever became in his alcoholic outbursts. You see, I had been able to distance myself from the difficult times of my early childhood. I could always escape through my bedroom window and work out my emotions by throwing rocks against the cliff or jumping off a roof into a pile of ivy. I would enter the world of pretend, bare chested with blackberries on my cheeks, I would pretend to fight the white man for my territory. I would fight the anger against my father by running through the dark, in an underground flood control tunnel, while screaming at the top of my lungs. Now the problem was, how do I escape when the problem was me?

This writer chooses to remain anonymous.



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continued on page 4

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Everybody has a defining moment in their life: a time when you look in the mirror and decide who you are. My children are lucky that I had two of these moments.

The first came when I was 24 and eight years into the above-mentioned relationship. I had four-year-old and six-month-old sons. This relationship had deteriorated, and my life was completely out of control. I had just enough tenacity remaining to realize that I could create a better life. That was all that I could muster up at the time.

Unfortunately, with an immaturity intensified by the use of mind-altering chemicals, I again made less-than-wise life choices. Within two years, I began relationship number two, and I had illegitimate twins. I also got out into the world and found that I was a natural salesperson. But, the best thing I did occurred in my driveway while enjoying the rising sun. I asked God, from whom I had turned away, about my situation. He worked so clearly in my life. I felt his voice in my heart, felt his love through my church, and was witnessed to by his followers.

This time, my defining moment was different. I was completely unafraid as I answered my Lord. I vowed to search for his will and immediately change all that he showed me to get out of my life. My life could now begin. My children could not understand the change I was determined to make.

Everything has changed in my life. You could not pick me out of a room and know that for eighteen months I was technically indigent. My children are well adjusted and normal. They are just like any other, with one rare exception. My children have experienced the miracles occurring every day at Pacific Lifeline.

Today I live with my four children and am able to deal with the issues of the average spoiled American. I rush to get three kids to three soccer practices at three different fields. I worry about getting the kids to practice for the church musical, instead of worrying about paying the electric bill. I worry about how much television my kids watch, not whether their father has been drinking and driving with my children in his vehicle. One thing will never change though. I still get so excited when I can pay all of my bills! God is good! ♦

Beginnings of Pacific Lifeline

A woman's story of vision and reality

by Sheron Brunner

Sheron Brunner lives in Northern California. She has developed Brunner & Associates, a company that markets financial programs designed to bring financial empowerment and freedom through education.

I lost my marriage and my home, my church and community. Suddenly the children and I began to experience poverty.

In childhood, I was blessed and cursed with an incredible sense of compassion. I cared about the needs of others and often felt the pain of hurting people and animals. This led me to being involved in community concerns in a variety of ways.

When I was 20, I was working as a case follow-up worker for the county juvenile division. One day my supervisor asked if I would take a young teenage boy overnight to my house because the only other alternative was county jail. This was the very beginning of what developed into foster parenting and lasted for 25 years. I was very, very concerned about children living lives of despair. I also worked with a local college to start a big brother/big sister program for the sociology depart-

ment. Students participated, helping kids in the community.

I married and gave birth to two sons. I also adopted a daughter, one of my foster care babies. At that time, I switched to fostering younger children. I began to dream about having a group home for kids; I could only do so much in foster care. I spent years with that dream at the foundation of my life. I wanted to remove every kid from every bad situation.

But, during this time I learned that moms need to take care of their kids and kids need to be with their mom. I started working with moms to improve their parenting skills. Then I started working with women

to learn to help themselves be strong, self-supporting and loving parents.

At this time my marriage of 18 years came to an end, and I became a single parent myself. I was living in my hometown, alongside life-long friends, and I was deeply imbedded in the Mennonite community. The divorce brought judgment upon me, although I had worked hard to keep my marriage together. I was shunned for five months. Children chased mine home from school, throwing rocks, because their dad left us. Close friends would not even speak to me. I lost my marriage and my home, my church and community. Suddenly the children and I began to experience poverty.

I moved to Wichita, newly divorced and betrayed by the church. I believed that all those people couldn't be wrong. I began to disbelieve my own faith. It was devastating. Numerous times I was so close to homelessness, it was crippling. I was working on becoming a financial counselor. One person came with a trunk full of groceries and assisting in job possibilities. I learned how to be assisted by others in a way that was not demeaning but empowering. I was able to keep going with the occasional gifts and support from others.

Five years later, I still had the dream of a group home, and I had a deep and rich understanding of being in a place of need and receiving support. One weekend I was reading the paper, while sick in bed, and the *Parade Magazine* had a picture of a small boy in San Francisco, leaning against a lamppost with tears on his cheeks. A "john" had just dropped him off. The title of the article was "Throw-away Children." I said, "I can do something about this." I then committed myself to being open to opportunities to do shelter work. It would mean giving up my successful career in Wichita. I had built a good life. My kids were in college. I knew I had made it with my own hard work and the belief and support of many. I believed that with the right kind of support, people could make it. I believed it was time to do something with a dream that had lasted 25 years.

A couple of months later, I stopped to visit with friends. We both were a part of the Brethren in Christ Church, and



on their coffee table I saw a picture of the Lifeline building. The headline read, "Lifeline needs a new director." My friend said, "That's you," and I said, "That's me." It just so happened that the Pacific Conference BIC bishop was coming to town in two days. The rest is history.

I was able to build a women and children's program in 1989 which continues even now. The shelter that originated in San Francisco has been relocated to Southern California. The work moved but I did not move with it. I am grateful that the work goes on. I have joy in knowing that this work has impacted the lives of countless families. Many, many children have been brought to a better place in their lives. ♦

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Pacific Lifeline

Pacific Lifeline in Upland, California, is sponsored by the Brethren in Christ Church and many interested donors across the country. It is a long-term shelter for women and children which can take up to six families at one time, from a few months up to a year. There is a full-time director, Bob Verseput, and several part-time staff. Staff includes a caseworker; an adult group leader; a therapist who sees both mothers and their children, when old enough; a donor developer; and a children's program coordinator, who also lives in the residence. A resident meets with the whole team to lay out her goals initially, and a contract is signed by all present so staff can assist her in meeting the goals she has set for herself. Overall the purpose of this shelter is to assist the women in becoming self-sufficient. She does this by her own hard work and through support at weekly meetings with the caseworker, therapist and in group. More information may be found at the web-site, www.Pacific-Lifeline.com.

Sixty seven unexpected gifts

by Betty Stevens

Betty Stevens is a licensed Marriage Family Therapist who works as the children and women's therapist at Pacific Lifeline in Upland, California. She is appreciated greatly by her clients, both young and old.

Since July 1996, I have had the unique privilege of having 67 precious children bless my life. As part of my work as the staff therapist at Pacific Lifeline Shelter for Women, I have worked and played with all these dear children. I never could have imagined the joy that would come from these precious gifts from God.

Before my work at Lifeline, I always wondered what it would be like to love working outside the home. Now, I know. I worked as a nurse and homemaker until returning to school when my children were in college. God led me to a Christian college to study Marriage and Family Therapy. Then, a deep knowing drew me to work with abused women. The surprise gift was the work with the children. As the shelter program developed, we as staff saw the need to spend time with the children as well as the mothers. Child therapy is challenging and quite different from adult therapy. You don't talk about emotions, goals, or interpersonal issues. You play. You play about emotions, events, friends, and problem solving.

Most mothers wish they had more time to give individual attention to their child. But in the busy lives we lead, there are always dishes to do or laundry to fold. We talk to our children while working or driving. Over the last five years, I have been able to spend 30 minutes a week individually focused on each child while they are living at Lifeline. We play and talk about whatever is important to the child at that moment. Stanley Greenspan, a nationally recognized authority on children, writes about the importance of what he calls "floor time." This is time that parents or significant others spend daily (weekly in my case) with the child. Children learn their value when they are valued. Children feel understood and worthy when others take time to listen to and care about them.

My heart just bursts when I think about the results of "floor time" with these little ones. Imagine announcing your presence in the long hallway of the shelter residence

and having seven little heads pop out saying, "Betty, is it my time to play with you?" Actually, it is more like seven little bodies running toward me asking for a hug. Children know when they are loved. They are wired to know this without words. They feel loved, and I am personally blessed beyond belief.

Our play therapy includes a lot of drawing. We use very large newsprint paper. One very traumatized child recently drew a huge black tornado-like spiral with three dots. I asked what the inner dot was saying, and she whispered, "Help." I expected the outer dots to be saying something more hopeful, but each of the three dots were all saying, "Help." This child was unable to draw a house of any form, perhaps showing her lack of safety and containment. By the time she left, she was much more secure. She no longer drew the spirals but drew an intact house with a door.

Children draw their families. Amazingly, even after a short time, many begin drawing the other children in the shelter as a "family." One child included several new shelter friends and me in her "family" drawing. Some children's drawings are chaotic or trauma filled. Rescue themes are frequent. They draw or play through the traumas and insecurities of the years before coming to Lifeline. Since families are allowed to stay up to a year at Lifeline, we can see the visible changes. Their drawings change as they experience predictability and safety.

Our director, Bob Verseput, built a sand play tray for child therapy. Sand play is a favorite. Children act out stories with miniature people, cars, furniture, and animals. Each child's background is reflected in play. Many children have internal images of being abused, their mother being abused, abandonment by a parent, or simply moving about because of circumstances. A ferocious bear or shark are often used. These powerful animals help gain control over these "bad" things in their lives. Social skills and problem solving also come from play. For instance,

Before my work at Lifeline, I always wondered what it would be like to love working outside the home. Now, I know.

with leading, the miniature child in the sand may think of ways to make friends with another.

I have the opportunity to play games, have play dough tea parties, and fly kites. One older child had never flown a kite. After seeing her kite soar, she said, "I can do anything." She had resources and power she never knew she had. I have literally spent hours looking at baseball cards and playing the same game over and over. But, for one child, I was the first person who ever really looked at his book of baseball cards and asked questions about it. To be interested in what the child values brings personal value to the child.

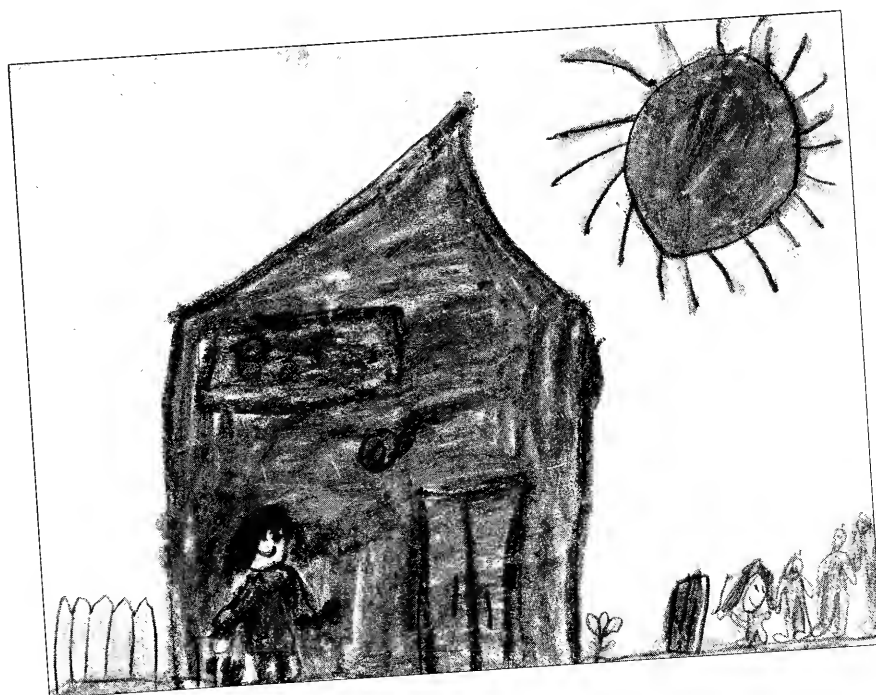
Sticker charting is a common tool. The mother and I choose a weekly focus behavior and then several easier tasks. Stickers are given daily for successes. No hitting or kicking, getting dressed without fussing, and brushing teeth are three typical tasks for a chart. This gives success experiences and good training. Certificates are given as rewards for the week. One child (from a domestic violence background) came to me and said, "When I see my daddy, I'm going to tell him that Betty will make him a chart with 'No Hitting' on it. Then he'll get stickers when he doesn't hit my mom. Then we can live together again." How simple life is through the child's eyes! If only life were actually that simple.

Therapy has some things in common with being a grandmother. Even though these are not my own children, I love each of them. With discovering who they are, I share with the moms about the special gifts that I see each child brings to the world. Often mothers say, "Oh, I've never really noticed that. That is wonderful." When mothers see others admiring and valuing their child, their own view changes (and their parenting). One overwhelmed mother struggled to get through the day, just able to provide food and shelter. At Lifeline she had the safety of food and shelter but really didn't notice how precious her children were. With seeing them through others' eyes, she began to see her children with more appreciation. When this happens, the children sense this increased love.

Many of you have taken your children someplace and experienced it anew as your child experienced it for the first time. Looking through a child's eyes is so unique. I love listening to a child's description of his or her world. The world is scary because their understanding is limited. They hold many emotions, even if unexpressed in words. They have great memories. A mother who graduated from the program called me yesterday to tell me about her daughter's comment about the family's stay at Lifeline. "That was the time we stayed in the big house with lots of friends." This is what homeless shelters can be.

I love to write about the work at Lifeline. The work is for the children. But only God could create a job that would have so many blessings for the workers. The more time I spend with the children, the more I am personally blessed. These children are the unexpected gifts in my life. I look forward to more children. Five years ago, I worked with a shy, traumatized eight-year-old boy. This last Christmas, at a Graduate Party, this same boy (now very tall and 13 years old) came up and hugged me. God has given me a job I love. ♦

Therapy has some things in common with being a grandmother. Even though these are not my own children, I love each of them.



The past is over

by Donna J. Stanford

Donna Stanford currently lives in Hesperia, California with her two sons, her oldest daughter, and granddaughter. She works as a counselor with Prototypes Women's Center Rehabilitation doing a multitude of duties and also finds time to take coursework at the local community college.

Doing drugs made everything go away. The more drugs, the better I felt. I was not paying attention to the hell I was putting my children through.

It all started in the Military—a little pot, a little hash. I received an honorable discharge from the military in 1986. Because of unresolved feelings over my mother's death and many other feelings, I hit the big stuff—methamphetamine and cocaine. Doing drugs made everything go away. The more drugs, the better I felt. I did not pay attention to the hell I was putting my children through. In 1992, my daughters, ages 16 and 14, had had enough. They asked me if they could go live with their father. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. With the girls not here, I thought my life would go smoother. Instead, things got worse. I had more time to do more drugs and get into more trouble. Sometimes I felt so lonely and missed them so much. My two younger boys experienced such an emptiness without their sisters. They were so confused. They actually thought I sent the girls away. I had nowhere to live. I roamed from friend to friend with the boys. We had no stability. I had wrecked my only vehicle because I was strung out. Child Protective Services was after me and threatened to take my boys.

I decided I had had enough. In 1994, I checked into a rehabilitation center, Prototypes Women's Center in Pomona, with my boys. My boys were not happy about it, but they were very receptive after I explained to them that Mommy was really sick and needed help. The rehab had counseling for all three of us. I cleared up all of my legal matters like my tickets and other offenses. I put the boys in soccer and became Team Mom. After being in the rehab for about three months, my father died. This time I couldn't hold down the feelings and hide behind the drugs. I had to deal with it.

I signed up for college and started to get it together. I was ready to move out of the rehab but still had nowhere to go. The rehab told me about this place called Foothill Family Shelter in Upland, California.

I had to go to an interview and explain to them how I wanted to make my life better. You could stay in the shelter for three

months and save money while being on welfare. We had a furnished two bedroom apartment there. They were really structured and assisted me with financial counseling and nutrition. We even had a therapist. I continued going to college while living there. The boys continued in soccer, and I was still Team Mom.

Upon my completion of the shelter program, they referred me to Pacific Lifeline, another shelter program. Pacific Lifeline had a social worker to meet with once a week. I continued going to college and stayed focused. We all saw a therapist. After I was there a year, I was ready to get a place of our own. I had finished most of my college classes and eventually completed school in 10 months. I now was computer literate but without employment experience, it was going to be difficult to land my first job.

Right before I left Pacific Lifeline, my sons and I were in the newspaper. We had Christmas wishes. My Christmas wish was for a good paying job. My boys, of course, wanted new bikes. A woman in Upland gave me a chance and hired me to run her office. My boys received their bikes from a very nice gentleman who was from a moving storage company in Ontario, California. I moved out and rented an apartment in Ontario. I still had the boys in soccer and still was Team Mom.

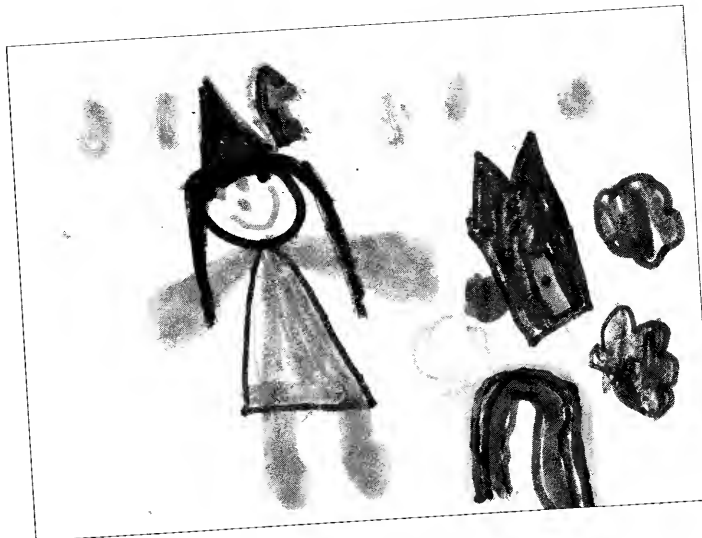
I lived there about one and a half years. My daughters had kept in touch and were so proud of the way I had changed my life and wanted to come home to their mom. My oldest, now 19, had given birth to a daughter. My youngest daughter, now 17, just wanted to come home. They came out to investigate their mother.

After working for the lady in Upland for over two years, not getting a pay increase or even being appreciated and sometimes totally forgotten on payday, I had to quit. So here I was back in the job market. I started working for the Ontario Airport as a security guard/pager. Also, I worked Tuesday nights at Pacific Lifeline, teaching computer skills to the women at the shelter.

In 1999, I had to move out of my Ontario apartment because the area was getting infested with drugs, and I didn't want my boys to get involved. I moved to Montclair with all of my children. The boys were still in soccer, and I continued as Team Mom. The airport changed the paging system and hired me to page in the main dispatch office. After working six months for the airport, they informed me that my fingerprints showed up with convictions that I hadn't disclosed on my application. The convictions were eleven years old. I was let go. Confused and shocked, I was without a job again.

Thank goodness my daughters had good jobs at the time. They were there for me. I immediately started looking for another job because I was not going to ask for handouts or go back on aid. I applied for unemployment. I no sooner got my first unemployment check when I was hired at Prototypes Women's Center Rehabilitation working as a night counselor. I now had a good stable job and felt like I could give to others what had been given to me: sobriety.

Then after living at the Montclair apartment for six months, they raised my rent from \$750 a month to \$830 a month for a two-bedroom apartment with one bath, no backyard, and just a small patio. In addition, the apartment complex had many places where the boys could ride their skateboards but were not allowed.



So I pursued my veterans' loan status and started looking for a home I could afford. The only houses I could afford were in the desert area of Victorville and Hesperia. I started looking there. I now own a four bedroom house with two baths and a three car garage on a little over a half acre, all for under \$700 a month. My boys have dirt bikes, a pool table in the garage, and they attend a brand new school. They play basketball in the driveway and ride their skateboards and scooters without someone telling them that they can't.

I am still pursuing my computer career and am attending college in Victorville. I am also taking some psychology courses to help me at my current job. I know I'm not a real religious person, but I do think back on my upbringing and remember to pray for the Lord to watch over my family. I know he has. ♦

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The faces of homelessness

When someone says the word "homeless," most people immediately think of the unkempt man standing on the corner of a major intersection with a cardboard sign reading, "Broke, Homeless, Need Money, God Bless!" This is the stereotype that most Americans have when it comes to homelessness. All too many of us believe that this is the face of homelessness.

In reality, the face of homelessness is much different. Betty* has been homeless, off and on, for the past twenty years.

Betty is diagnosed with persistent and severe mental illness. In addition, she has many physical health problems. She has been in a wheel chair because of the paralysis on the left side of her body. She is single. Her family lives thousands of miles away. She lives on a small Social Security check of just over \$500 a month. However, in Austin, Texas, where Betty lives, a one bedroom apartment will range from \$450—\$900 a month. Even with social security benefits, most of Betty's income is taken up by her housing costs.

by Kathryn Goering Reid

Kathryn Goering Reid is the pastor of Austin Mennonite Church, Austin, Texas. In addition, she is Executive Director of the Texas Homeless Network. The Texas Homeless Network is an organization committed to providing effective service to homeless people by providing information, resources, and technical assistance to homeless service providers.

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*Names have been changed.



Living on the streets is extremely dangerous to women and children. They are very vulnerable to violence and abuse. They are victimized by almost everyone they come into contact with.

Jose* and his sisters are often without shelter with their mother. Jose's father deserted the family long ago. Mom's boyfriends are generally violent, and the family has had to flee from the terror of abuse many times. Each time they escape, they leave all their clothing, toys, and furniture behind. They move to a new school. Jose has been in more than six different schools in one year. Often it takes weeks to enroll in school. Every year Jose finds himself falling further and further behind the other students. Is it any wonder that at some point, Jose will most likely give up totally and drop out of school? Jose's mother is afraid to ask for help from domestic violence shelters because her legal status in this country is undocumented. She worries that she will be sent back to Central America and be separated from her children, so she refuses most help.

Susan* is now the manager of a large department store, but once she was homeless. When she was a young adult, she had a substance abuse problem. Her drinking destroyed all her relationships. She finally left her home with nowhere to go, taking with her a three-year-old child. Together she and her daughter lived in a car in a back alley while she got herself back together. Today, she has had more than fifteen years of sobriety. No one who knows her would ever believe that she had been homeless. She wonders whether her daughter remembers that time in their lives.

Tanya* is only sixteen, but she is pregnant. Her parents' response was to kick her out of her home. In Texas, nearly 60 percent of all pregnant teenagers experience homelessness during their pregnancy. During these times when they are home-

less, they travel from friend to friend, or they live in cars. Sometimes they form "families" with other teens and live in abandoned buildings. Tanya doesn't get any prenatal care. She will most likely face losing her child when she delivers her baby, as it will be difficult for her to take care of a child while living on the streets.

These are real faces of homelessness. Homes for the Homeless, a homeless service provider and research organization in New York City, reports that the average age of a homeless person in the United States is nine. While this statistic may not be true everywhere, more and more women and children are finding themselves without shelter. Recently, the Texas Homeless Network interviewed thousands of homeless men and women, both those in homeless shelters and those living on the streets. More than 35 percent of the homeless in 10 cities of Texas were women. Seventy percent of the family members living with a homeless person were children. In our study, 88 percent of the women cited domestic violence as the predominant reason they are homeless.

Our society denies or minimizes the problem of homelessness with myths that all homeless people are men who are lazy and unwilling to work. While substance abuse and mental illness contribute significantly to the problem, homelessness is a poverty issue. In addition, homelessness is not just an urban problem. Even rural communities have people who experience homelessness. All too often, homeless women and children are invisible to the community. They seldom stand on the corner with a cardboard sign. Instead, they "couch hop" from one friend or relative's home to another until they run out of options. Then they resort to living in cars, abandoned buildings, or simply living on the streets.

MCC's response to homelessness

MCC Ontario has partnered with the Kitchener-Waterloo YWCA to create Circle of Friends. Circle of Friends recruits and trains women in the community to support homeless women who are making the transition to permanent housing. Through this program, women leave the YWCA homeless shelter with a Circle of Friends who, for the coming year, support her in her move back into the community and independence. The hope is that these friendships will continue much longer than the formal one year commitment. Taralea DeMeuleneare, an MCC local service worker, is the coordinator of this program.

Living on the streets is extremely dangerous to women and children. They are very vulnerable to violence and abuse. They are victimized by almost everyone they come into contact with. They often experience rape and physical beatings. They find the "least harmful" male to partner with in the hopes that he will protect them from others. Many times, in order to survive, they numb themselves with drugs and

alcohol. They live without medical and dental care. Some have persistent and severe mental illness. As the invisible homeless, there are few resources for homeless women and children.

Another important aspect of homelessness is that, like many other social problems, it can be cyclical. Fifteen percent of homeless people (men and women) reported that they had experienced homelessness (living in a shelter or being in foster care) as a child. In other words, children who experience homelessness are at risk of being homeless as adults. The cycle of poverty continues unless support systems are put into place to help the child overcome his or her lack of education and the emotional devastation that homelessness has on children.

Homelessness is an issue of poverty that affects the lives of thousands of North American women and children. Many women and children who find themselves

living in the lowest levels of poverty are either homeless or at risk of being homeless. Help is often hard to access since many service providers are not able to cope with family units. Resources are limited and stretched as many people living in poverty find that the time limits on governmental support systems are limiting the effectiveness of safety systems.

The faces of the homeless, like Betty, Jose, Susan and Tanya, are all around us. However, most Christians close their eyes to the needs of these women and children. Faith based programs can provide much needed help (food, shelter, job training, childcare and much more). Our outreach needs to be expanded to be sure that those living at the extremely lowest levels of our economy are not left behind. Who needs our help more than women and children who stand before us without shelter and food? Jesus reminds us that our obligation to God begins in our care of them. ♦

In our study, eighty-eight percent of the women cited domestic violence as the predominant reason they are homeless.

Bridge of Hope One church, one family

"Women and children are the most fragile of the homeless population."

—Linda Witmer, public health nurse and co-founder of Bridge of Hope.

"Homelessness is a condition in which individuals and families have no residence, owned or leased, or shared in which they can live safely . . . and legally both day and night . . . with privacy and dignity."

—The Coalition on the Homeless in Pennsylvania

In 1987, public health nurse Linda Witmer and Sandra Lewis (then a shelter director) recognized that the 30-day shelter was ineffective in helping to make real differences in the lives of homeless women and their children. If underlying problems weren't addressed, homeless single mothers remained stuck in a cycle of poverty and homelessness as they faced overwhelming obstacles alone.

Witmer and Lewis, along with members from local churches, began to dream of helping homeless women with children

address their long-term needs within the context of a church mentoring group that would continue to provide support after the services of paid professionals ended. Since serving its first family in 1989, Bridge of Hope has been the fulfillment of those first dreams.

Bridge of Hope's message is that by combining the efforts of volunteer church-based mentoring groups in a planned friendship ministry with staff-provided outcome-driven services, church groups can help those in their own communities who are hurting.

"Bridge of Hope touches on every aspect of an individual's life to help make it whole again . . . I was given that second chance that I so desperately needed."

—2000 Bridge of Hope graduate

"Through my experience as a mentor, I learned many things. Most importantly I learned that God needs to guide and direct each of us and that we can't

by Linda Wright

Linda Wright is a writer whose nonfiction articles usually concern family health and women's issues.

Bridge of Hope touches on every aspect of an individual's life to help make it whole again . . . I was given that second chance that I so desperately needed.

The result is not a quick fix. What Bridge of Hope offers is the structure, professional support, and ongoing friendships of mentors in local congregations that is needed to end the cycle of poverty and homelessness for women and their children.

make decisions for others even when we think that would be best.”

—*Barb Martin, Mentor, Hinkletown Mennonite Church, Ephrata, Pennsylvania*

“Our church’s leadership team wanted to help a single mother in our congregation, but we just didn’t have the tools Bridge of Hope was there to lead us and teach us how to help.”

—*Pastor Bill Blank, Maple Grove Mennonite Church, Atglen, Pennsylvania*

The mentoring groups come from Lutheran, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Methodist, AME, Episcopal, Assembly of God, and other denominations. The groups of 8–12 people offer friendship and nurturing acceptance to empower needy families to grow emotionally, spiritually, and socially.

Referrals are accepted from shelters, domestic violence programs, drug and alcohol recovery programs, transitional housing programs, and other faith based agencies. In addition, churches may refer families.

According to “The 1998 Self-Sufficiency Standard,” the hourly wage a woman with a school-aged child and a teenager must earn to be self-sufficient is \$11.91 in Chester County, Pennsylvania and \$10.22 in Lancaster County. Long term solutions to poverty often include employment training that results in a job that can support a family. Financial self-sufficiency is a primary area of focus for Bridge of Hope. Bridge of Hope’s staff provides the families with life-skills training and case management services. Locating the hous-

ing for the family in the vicinity of the mentoring group allows opportunities for friendships to develop. Bridge of Hope provides the security deposit, as well as rental assistance on a decreasing basis for up to 12 months, during job training and subsequent employment.

Bridge of Hope’s staff also help clients with career counseling, goal setting, budgeting, and parenting. Each woman develops a plan for working toward financial self-sufficiency. This plan becomes an integral part of an individualized contract with the family and provides needed accountability. The unique result offers families an effective way to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness by creating a secure home and a community of supportive friends.

The result is not a quick fix. What Bridge of Hope offers is the structure, professional support, and ongoing friendships of mentors in local congregations that is needed to end the cycle of poverty and homelessness for women and their children. Funded entirely through donations and grants from private foundations, Bridge of Hope is a cost-effective approach to ending and preventing homelessness for single women and their children.

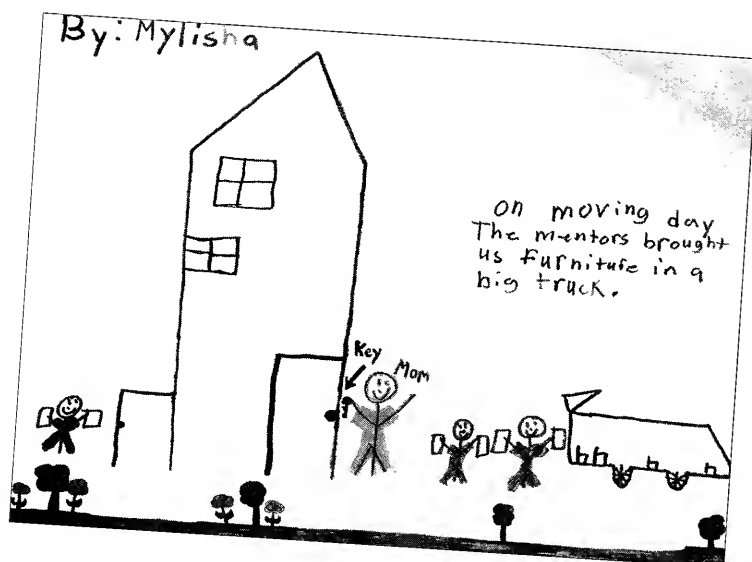
“Our goal is to exemplify Christ’s love and to promote physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wholeness.”

—*Edith Yoder, Executive Director, Bridge of Hope*

Each participant’s success in Bridge of Hope is measured by the achievement of the following outcome based objectives:

1. Has the family attained and maintained housing?
2. Has the woman attained financial self-sufficiency through employment, budgeting, and the securing of adequate transportation, childcare and health insurance?
3. Has the family developed a support network through mentors and others?
4. Has the woman grown in areas of holistic living, including parenting and emotional/spiritual/physical health?

Using the above measurements of success, 80 percent or more of the families entering the program successfully complete Bridge of Hope.



In response to inquiries from groups in other cities and states, the Board of Directors and the Executive Director have developed a Bridge of Hope affiliate model. This information includes how to start an affiliate, from the initial gathering of interested people to reaching out to the first family. Bridge of Hope provides training and on-site consultation to help communities launch their own Bridge of Hope. In February 2000, Bridge of Hope BuxMont, serving Pennsylvania's Bucks and Montgomery Counties was the first to be granted affiliate status.

"The success of Bridge of Hope is that the program matches homeless women who want help with groups of individuals and families who want to help, a unique approach . . . The bridge, of course, is this caring scaffolding that links the resources of the local church to the neglected needy in the community."

—Karen Mains (*Comforting One Another*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1997. p. 195.) ♦

The foundation to a new life

I entered the Bridge of Hope program at the lowest point in my life, finding it difficult to get through the day. There were so many challenges: being unable to live in my home, needing childcare for my children, needing full-time employment.

Outside of the welfare system, I didn't know of any organization that would provide help. While I had worked part-time during my marriage, I had not worked in my chosen profession of nursing in twelve years. It was the profession in which I could make enough money to support my family, but twelve years away from the work force is a long time.

I was confused about what to do. I remember that I needed assistance, from one who later became one of my mentors, to fill out the Bridge of Hope application. Even then, I found it hard to accept the fact that I was homeless. It was awkward and uncomfortable to expose my situation in the interview with the Bridge of Hope staff, but they were very kind, patient, and supportive.

As a result of the interview, a customized regimen was formulated to meet my needs. A group of caring individuals volunteered to be my mentoring group. They became the extended arms of Bridge of Hope and have been there for me through thick and thin. I could not have had a better group. We bonded very well. The love of God definitely shines through them.

Initially, housing was my biggest need. Through collaborative efforts, temporary housing and then the house I live in now were found. I still can't believe how many people helped with the moves. Bridge of Hope helped me incorporate rent into my budget. Monthly budget reports produced accountability, showing me all the areas where I could improve my spending habits.

My mentoring group was knowledgeable about the resources available to single mothers. Childcare services were the most beneficial to me. My paycheck began to go further. I appreciate the financial support and counseling I received while in Bridge of Hope. What I've gained will be applicable throughout my life.

Once a month, several mentoring groups got together first for a time of fellowship and then we, the clients, met separately together. We had speakers and talked about issues that concerned us as single mothers. I was able to put much of the information they made available to us concerning parenting, car maintenance, and legal issues to good use.

I feel the greatest benefit I've reaped from Bridge of Hope is the rebuilding of my self-esteem. The support from my mentoring group and Bridge of Hope has been overwhelming. The decisions I've made in my life have been met with encouragement and support from both.

as told to Linda Wright

A group from Maple Grove Menno-nite Church, Atglen, Pennsylvania mentored this woman. She completed Bridge of Hope in February 2000 and is employed as a nurse.

There is a present from my mentors that I treasure above all else. It is a piece of paper on which is drawn a tree full of branches. On each branch is listed each mentor's perspective of how they see me.

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Over the course of this program, I have gained the confidence to hold my head up and return to my profession. I know it is by the grace of God and the prayers of many that I am where I am today.

I have felt the effects of my mentors' prayers. I know they are praying for me as I go to school. I have faced difficult tasks involved with my schooling and have been able to get through them with calming peace. When you know you have people praying for you, it provides such a foundation.

There is a present from my mentors that I treasure above all else. It is a piece of paper on which is drawn a tree full of branches. On each branch is listed each mentor's perspective of how they see me. They see all this good stuff in me! When I get discouraged, I pull it out. To know

that others see this in me is just overwhelming and so affirming.

What is special about the Bridge of Hope program is that it builds relationships. More than support, Bridge of Hope develops bonds that are not quite like other relationships. My mentors' arms are the outstretched arms of God.

Over the course of this program, I have gained the confidence to hold my head up and return to my profession. I know it is by the grace of God and the prayers of many that I am where I am today. ♦

The mommy

by Laura J. Cork

Laura Cork and her boys now live in their own apartment. Laura is working and pursuing her education. The boys are in school. They all live a happy life.

I was living the perfect life, secure in my relationship, two beautiful boys, expecting our third boy, and eagerly looking forward to moving up north due to my husband's job transfer.

The birds were singing and the garden blooming as three young boys played in the afternoon sun. As I watched nature's glory unfold all around my boys, I stopped and remembered that just a short time before, it was not this way for my boys and me. I then took a moment to thank God for the life that my boys and I live and for all his glories that we, at times, take for granted in our day-to-day life: flowers, the sun, the green grass, the cozy shade of a large tree. These things went unseen and unnoticed by me just two short years ago when my "perfect life" dissolved.

I was living the perfect life, secure in my relationship, expecting our third boy, and eagerly looking forward to moving up north due to my husband's job transfer. We had some problems in our past because of my husband's alcohol abuse. We split up for one year. During that year, I secured a stable life and home for my boys and me. This life I secured with no help from Mike, my husband, yet when he phoned me after eleven months of a drinking binge with little contact with the boys, asking for help, I dropped everything and helped him. We decided after much discussion to reunite, and he moved back into my home and started sharing our life as a family again.

All was great until he accepted a promotion and left to find our new home. He convinced me that, in order to make the

move easier, we should eliminate all bills and liquidate our accounts and reestablish them in San Jose, which was to be our new home. I thought this sounded right, so I gave up my home, closed all accounts, took my boys and me out of school, and we moved in temporarily with his mom.

He left for San Jose on Mother's Day 1999, full of anticipation of his new life. As tears rolled down our cheeks, I had no idea he had no plans of our family staying together. His plan was to get out, and he planned it methodically.

He came at the end of June for a visit and told all who would listen that he loved me, and he could not wait until our family could be together again. Yet he had already started a relationship with someone else. Two weeks later, he called and told me, "I don't love you, I want nothing to do with you or that baby you are carrying." I had no words for him. My whole world crumbled. I was seven months pregnant with no money on hand, no income source, no home, and two boys under five, who were looking to me to take care of them and keep them safe. How could I do this? I was homeless. He hung up on me when I began to question, "Why?" When I called him two days later, he maintained his decision, saying again he wanted nothing to do with our unborn child. I told him he could not pick and choose which child he would stay involved with; he had three

boys, it was all or nothing. He then stated, "Fine, #### them all," and hung up. One week later, he came down and went through our belongings. He took everything of value, leaving me and the boys with nothing.

Meanwhile his mother, who sees no wrong in him, made life unbearable. We had to go. I had my boys depending on me, no time for my own pain or anger. I was, after all, the mommy, the caretaker of hope and happiness, so I put on a mask of bravery and started the hardest journey in my life. And the most rewarding.

I did what my frightened child would do; I ran to my mommy. Her landlord allowed my boys and me to move into her small one bedroom home until after I had my son and recovered from the birth. During the six month period that we lived there, Mike called and harassed me. He refused to support the boys and came down and took my van, leaving me to walk our son to kindergarten. "Not my problem," he said.

I totally lost faith, yet I would have angry, almost hateful, conversations with the Lord. "How could you allow this to happen to me? I have always been a good person." Mike had said so many times that I was "worthless, ugly and old and why would anyone want that on their arm." I deserved none of this, and yet as I was yelling at God, angry and hurt, he listened. He knew I could take no more from Mike, so God opened a door for my boys and me to a shelter where we moved.

Yet I was not stable enough. I had been knocked down too far, and I had no confidence. It gave me some rest at night that Mike no longer had a way to call me. Again God knew I needed more time for me. I was focused so hard on working and keeping my boys from the reality of their life that I had still not accepted myself. Living in denial was the norm for me.

God led me to another shelter and I went, dreading every part of the communal living arrangement and cursing Mike at every turn. As I moved my boys and me into this loud house full of strangers, I again yelled at God. But he was patient and knew what he was doing. I regained



a stable job, secured my income, and got over the emotional turmoil Mike had thrown me into. The counseling and constant support helped me to find me.

Then I got hit with another curve ball. I had gotten injured at work two years before and my hand, which unknown to me had glass in it, got infected. I had emergency surgery. After being in the hospital five days, I was released and told I could not work for months. Disability would not pay me since the injury was work-related, and worker's comp would not pay me since the original injury was old. Not only could I not work but I had no income at all. I still had no support from Mike, and I was due to move out of the homeless shelter in four months. Once again I faced an uncertain future but my fear could not overflow and affect my boys. I was the rock, the mommy. Again, my mask went on, and I retreated into myself. But this time I was more secure about our future. Four months later, after having no income for that time, my boys and I moved out, and I got myself released for work.

This journey of discovery ended with a beautiful reality that my life, my boys' lives and all of our happy sunny afternoons are due to the gift of strength that the Lord has given me; for even when I doubted myself, he did not. I have always believed in the power of the love of a mommy and that kept me going. Even when I lost faith, my boys never did. And on the darkest days, when my boys would look at me, I saw myself in their eyes and knew nothing could stop me. I was after all, their mommy. ♦

The year that would follow was full of challenges and setbacks. As I moved my boys and I into this loud house full of strangers, I again yelled at God almost nightly. But he was patient and knew what he was doing.



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**

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NEWS & VERBS

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT

Looking Ahead

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2002

Women in Zimbabwe



MARCH-APRIL 2002

Barriers to women
in leadership



MAY-JUNE 2002

Caregiving for
aging parents



JULY-AUGUST 2002

Women and AIDS

Elizabeth Soto Albrecht represented Mennonite World Conference at a consultation of representatives of Christian World Communions on "Overcoming Violence Against Women." The consultation, held in Dundee, Scotland, August 23-29, 2001, was an activity of the World Council of Churches' "Decade to Overcome Violence."

Goshen College is seeking a professor of economics. A Ph.D. in economics is strongly preferred. Responsibilities begin in August 2002. Send letter, resume and three references to Anita Statler, Academic Dean, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526-4795, E-mail: Dean@goshen.edu.

Sponsors are needed to support children in preschools in 14 rural communities in South Africa. Become a sponsor through MCC's Global Family Program. In Canada, call (888) 622-6337; in U.S.A., call (888) 563-4676. ◆

Women in leadership

On July 29, 2001, Iglesia Casa de Oracion in San Juan, Texas installed Elizabeth Vargas as their pastor. Elizabeth is currently attending a local seminary.

Raquel Lozano serves as pastor of Iglesia Rios de Agua Viva in Matamoros, a border-town in Mexico. This church works closely with the South Texas Mennonite Churches.

Anita K. Stalter, Goshen College professor of education and chair of the teacher education program, has been appointed as the college's vice president of academic affairs and academic dean, effective July 1, 2001. She is the first woman to serve in the position.